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SUBJECT: QUEBECERS GIVE BLOC QUEBECOIS 54 SEATS, PUNISHING LIBERALS

1. This cable was jointly prepared by the Montreal and Quebec City Consulates.

2. SUMMARY: As predicted, the Bloc Quebecois took 54 of 75 possible seats in Quebec in yesterday's Federal election, gaining 21 seats in Parliament, and matching the party's 1993 seat count, when former Bloc leader and founder Lucien Bouchard led the newly-born party to victory. Quebec voters were the least volatile in Canada, as election-day results matched what pollsters had measured from the outset of the campaign. Although the Conservatives came in second in a few races, neither they nor the New Democratic Party, which came in behind the Green party in many ridings, elected anyone in the province.

3. Some have called the Bloc's performance a resurrection, since only a year ago the party's imminent demise was predicted by many pundits. However, handed the gift of the corporate sponsorship scandals -- and Liberal stumbling in its Quebec strategy -- Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe adroitly managed an almost mistake-free campaign, shrewdly depicting himself and his party as trust-worthy and competent Quebec-firsters, while downplaying his party's sovereignist goals in order to make in-roads among non-separatist Quebec voters. While Separatist militants are buoyed by the election results, many Quebecers cast a protest vote for the Bloc, because they wanted to punish the Liberals, and couldn't stomach the Conservatives. END SUMMARY

Campaign Conduct

4. The corporate sponsorship scandals figured hugely in the election results. Gilles Duceppe, in his victory speech, reiterated that the loyalty of Quebecers cannot be bought, a reference to the Chretien government's channeling of funds to Liberal public relations firms in the province. Compounding their difficulties in overcoming the sponsorship scandals, the selection of Jean Lapierre as Prime Minister Martin's election lieutenant in Quebec was viewed by many as yet another example of Liberal cronyism. Lapierre, who squeaked out a victory in the well-to-do and traditionally Liberal Outremont riding of Montreal, reportedly had promotional contracts with the tobacco industry and other big business interests, even while he served as a journalist and host of public affairs television and radio shows.

5. While Lapierre was forced to take a low profile, Duceppe campaigned widely and prominently throughout the province, projecting confidence and promotion of Quebec's interests. Duceppe has been depicted by political cartoonists for years as a dour, shower-capped -- a 1997 photo of Duceppe touring a Cheese factory wearing a sanitary hat has dogged his political career -- single-issue cousin of the provincial Parti Quebecois leaders. However, during the campaign, Duceppe overcame his reputation for charmlessness.

Sovereignty Question Re-Opened?

6. PQ Opposition Leader Landry's comment in a June 23 Globe & Mail interview that a Bloc win could hasten the chances for a referendum on Quebec independence was practically the only gaffe in the Bloc's campaign. Duceppe, and other Bloc candidates, however, maintained a disciplined message that this election was not about sovereignty, an issue that can only be decided through a provincial referendum. While technically true, it was clear from Duceppe's acceptance speech and from Posts' campaign conversations with Bloc militants, that sovereignists in the province feel buoyed by the Bloc's show of strength. There is already speculation that the 56-year-old Duceppe, who hailed Landry as his friend and supporter in his victory speech, could succeed the 67-year-old PQ leader in the next provincial election.

7. Polling during the campaign did show a higher level of support for sovereignty -- at 50 percent according to some data -- than the average level since the 1995 referendum of 42 percent. However, analysts note that support for Quebec independence follows patterns that have been fairly constant over the past decades. Stronger among the young, weaker among the elderly, women and ethnic communities, support for sovereignty when a referendum is only a faint prospect years away is not taken very seriously, even by voters. The Parti Quebecois would have to regain their mandate in Quebec City for a referendum to be held. Though his government is very

unpopular right now, Liberal Quebec Premier Jean Charest does not have to call an election until 2007.

Liberal Fortress Montreal Holds, Though Cracks Show

18. Although none of the Montreal-area ministers and MPs lost their seats, many experienced their first tension-filled election night, with leads seesawing throughout the evening. Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew's victory in the Papineau riding was uncertain until early in the morning; he won by only a few hundred votes. Development Minister Liza Frulla, in Jeanne-Le Ber, similarly won by less than 500 votes. Those small margins of victory should not prevent the two ministers from playing a key role in trying to re-establish the Liberal base in Quebec. Martin is expected to rely as well on experienced Quebec MPs Denis Coderre and Stephane Dion. But Lapierre's election in Outremont may be a hot potato for Martin: if appointed to the cabinet, the former TV news analyst could remain a lightning rod for the media who will hound him about his past.

Bloc Inroads

19. The biggest loss for the Liberals in the Province was Heritage Minister Helene Chalifour-Scherrer in the Quebec City riding of Louis-Herbert. She lost to French CBC reporter Roger Clavet of the Bloc. The Bloc swept all 10 seats in the Quebec City region, with the exception of the Beauce riding, where Liberal Claude Drouin barely clung to his seat. He is now the only Liberal MP in eastern Quebec. The Liberal's star candidate Dennis Dawson in Beauport was beaten by Christian Simard, who won twice as many votes. The Liberals also lost Georges Farrah in the Iles-de-la-Madeleine to Bloquiste Raynald Blais.

110. For the sovereignists to make headway in their independence cause, they need to win converts in Quebec's ethnic communities. But during a candid conversation with Francine Lalonde, the Bloc's foreign affairs spokesperson, Montreal PAO was told that support for sovereignty among ethnic communities was still not very high despite the Bloc's incessant efforts. Even among the French-speaking Haitian community, support for the Bloc does not reach forty percent, said Lalonde. Lalonde said that for immigrants coming from countries where instability meant violence and chaos, it is very difficult to dismiss the fear campaign federalists mount any time Quebec's independence is mentioned. One of the Bloc's challenges is to convince Haitian and other immigrant groups that they would be better off in a sovereign Quebec, than in the Canada that welcomed them and gave them a passport. Still, Lalonde proudly introduced us to a Chinese volunteer from her riding, and also noted the endorsement of the Bloc by Black Coalition of Quebec President Dan Phillip.

111. A quick look at the results shows the Bloc did improve its standing in ridings with a large ethnic percentage. Outremont, with a non-Francophone population of 50 percent, almost voted in a Bloc candidate, but that can partly be explained by the unpopularity of Jean Lapierre. However, in St-Leonard (a heavily Italian district), Massimo Pacetti, a young Liberal unknown won scandal-tainted Alfonso Gagliano's old riding by more than 17,000 votes.

112. In his victory speech, Duceppe also proudly hailed the victories of Bloc candidates Maka Kotto in St. Lambert and Bernard Cleary in Louis-Saint-Laurent. Kotto, an actor originally from Cameroon, has appeared on stage and in television series in Quebec. Bernard Cleary, an Innu, is the first member of a First Nation to be elected from Quebec. Duceppe, who has disciplined BQ MPs in the past for digressions from the party line, may find it more difficult to keep these newcomers on message. Cleary drew rebukes from other First Nation chiefs and from Duceppe during the campaign when he said that Ottawa should send in the army to quell trouble on the Mohawk territory of Kanesatake. Kotto is used to expressing himself freely, as well.

Role of the Bloc In Ottawa Unchanged

113. Although headlines called the results a triumph for the Bloc, leader Duceppe may have preferred a Conservative minority with the Bloc holding the balance of power. With a Liberal-NDP coalition, the left-of-center Bloc is still in the position of trying to claim credit for any progressive measures the government passes while continuing to criticize any attempts to centralize power in Ottawa. The Bloc can be expected as well to continue hammering on the subject of fiscal imbalance between the provinces and the federal government when the House of Commons reopens.

114. If NDP leader Jack Layton is true to his campaign rhetoric, and makes proportional representation a top priority once the Commons reconvenes, the Bloc might make an issue of it. Though theoretically everyone supports PR, the subject is very sensitive in Quebec because it is closely

related to linguistic divisions; proportional representation would give Montreal's West Island Anglophones considerable power.

15. Comment: Voter turnout in Quebec was lower than the national average at 58.9 percent. The Liberals may have been hurt by voter fatigue in areas where municipal demerger referendums were held just last week. All in all, while the Bloc Quebecois has certainly received a new lease on life, it would be hard to characterize the Bloc win as a sea change in attitudes here toward sovereignty. As for the lifespan of the current minority Liberal government, Bloc MPs will not want to impose yet another election campaign on Quebecers in the near future given that their party's current strength may fail when anger toward the Liberals dissipates. End Comment.

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